

## THE GODS AND THE DEAD

**François Lissarrague** – I work on images that one finds on vases, mainly Attic or South Italian. These are objects with a technical function – they are used in banquets - and the decoration of these vases is often narrative, in particular on the example I have selected today. On one side we see a judgment of Paris: the judgement of Paris is a story in which the Gods have been summoned by the Discord to choose between Hera, Athena and Aphrodite. As the Gods do not want to decide, they pass the responsibility to the humans, and Paris is the victim; Paris is a Trojan, son of King Priamos, a shepherd; here you can see him seated, in the middle of the image accompanied by Hermes, who points to this central figure with his finger. The Goddesses are displayed on both sides of him. Hera holds a mirror in her hand; she is crowned and in the mirror you can see the image of Hera. Athena, just below, is preparing herself; she has left her shield, her helmet, laying down her arms; she is washing, making herself beautiful, standing in front of a small monument where a whole set of images is displayed such as a votive plaque and offerings. Many objects stand around Athena. Behind Paris – he is not looking at her but he is going to choose her – there is Aphrodite, in the company of Eros. This judgment will be the cause of the Trojan War. We have here a complete system of objects such as beauty, Eros, the mirror, the toilet and other objects which qualify the power of each of these goddesses. Basically, what Paris chooses is Eros, desire.

On the other side of the vase, we see a totally different scene. We see Odysseus, seated on a rock, holding a knife, having just cut the throat of some rams. These are not easy to make out - one has to look closely – in the legs of Odysseus; you see stripes of the sheep's fur, legs up, suffused by blood. This blood attracts the dead, emerging from the ground! And apart from Odysseus and his two companions standing next to him, you see at ground-level in a corner near the handle, the old, white-haired head of Tiresias, a blind man and seer, that emerges and speaks with Odysseus. We know this scene from the *Odyssey*, it is called the *Nekyia* – the interrogation of the Dead. The Dead appear and they start telling Odysseus their sadness, but also how to get back home. So here also we have a scene that depicts humans interacting with not the invisible Gods but rather the invisible Dead. On each side of the vase we have that relation visible/invisible. It is a matter of sight: Tiresias the blind man, knows the future; he does not see but he knows, and the images play on all these levels.

What makes the richness and the complexity of this vase is that very often people look only at one side of it or at the other; in the books you find the Judgment or the *Nekyia*. What I am interested in is to connect both, because one side precedes the *Iliad*, and the other is part of the *Odyssey*. These two

moments of great Homeric poetry are articulated with each other through precise details in the image. It is the knife, the rams and the head of Tiresias that make the subject clear and on the other side it is the mirror, the fountain, Eros which allows us to see that it is about beauty. So in the end it is quite a game of gazes, visible/invisible, the Gods and the Dead, the Iliad, the Odyssey; all this on an object to be used in banquets, around which people might (or might not) have started telling stories like this one, that I am currently trying to recount.

**3min 38sec**